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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PHNOM PENH 000832

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SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER HUN SEN PREVIEWS THAKSIN VISIT

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR CAROL A. RODLEY FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) Summary: The diplomatic spat between Cambodia and Thailand took center stage during the Ambassador's meeting with Prime Minister Hun Sen November 8. Hun Sen confirmed that former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra would arrive in Cambodia on November 10 and would deliver a speech to Cambodian officials at the Ministry of Economy and Finance on November 12. He also confirmed that, aside from the diplomatic friction, tensions were low and military commanders remained cooperative at the border, and that he would continue to monitor Thailand's reaction and would respond in kind to each diplomatic downgrade that the Abhisit government initiated. We expect Hun Sen will now shift largely from an offensive to a defensive position. He is of course hopeful that the Thai will refrain from taking precipitous actions, but he is prepared to match any Thai action with a Cambodian reaction. In that context, Hun Sen will likely be both confident and relaxed during the upcoming Singapore meetings, amenable to suggestions that a de-escalation of rhetoric and a re-engagement between Cambodia and Thailand is in the best interests of the region as well as the parties. End summary.

12. (C) In raising this issue during a meeting previously scheduled to discuss a broad range of other issues (septel), the Ambassador reaffirmed that both Cambodia and Thailand should work to reduce political tensions and to refrain from acts that could be considered provocative. Hun Sen replied that military cooperation was proceeding very well at the border) "there is no chaos," he explained, and "things remain very quiet." He also said there is no need "to keep so much force there" and confirmed press reports that he had ordered the 911 Brigade paratrooper unit be recalled to Phnom Penh and that he would do his best to ensure that Thai and Cambodian commanders continued to cooperate and avoid any military confrontation. If the situation remained calm, Hun Sen added he would also recall Division 1, which would reduce the Cambodian military presence at the border to normal, pre-July 2008, levels. Hun Sen reiterated that he wanted to "build up mutual trust between the armies," and that he hoped that Thai military commanders would continue to cooperate and work to "reduce tensions."

13. (C) Hun Sen underscored that Thaksin would travel to Cambodia from "another ASEAN country," but that "the Thai don't care" about the purported double standard that has led the Thai government to criticize Hun Sen so publicly while

ignoring Thaksin's presence elsewhere in the region. (Note: Hun Sen did not cite the name of the country where Thaksin was reportedly currently residing. End Note.). "Whether Thaksin comes or not," Hun Sen explained, it remains the "business of Cambodia" to engage him as an economic adviser during the current economic downturn. Hun Sen confirmed what he has said publicly: that the RGC would not "accept" any extradition request from Thailand as this case was "purely political" and the Thai-Cambodian extradition agreement was based on customary international law that clearly allowed extraditions to be rejected based on political context. And although he said he expected the Thai government to deliver a "letter of extradition," he said that the RGC had already prepared a reply rejecting the request.

14. (C) Because military relations at the border remained cooperative, Hun Sen said that the principal conflict with Thailand was diplomatic and that the public pronouncements from various Thai officials to downgrade diplomatic relations between Thailand and Cambodia reflected "internal confusion" within the Thai government. After Thaksin's arrival, Hun Sen said he would simply monitor the Thai reaction day by day. "There are many in the Thai government who are not acting under orders of the Thai Prime Minister," Hun Sen stated, pointing to the example of the Thai army, which "had to obstruct the yellow shirt protesters" sent from Bangkok from reaching Preah Vihear on September 19. In fact, Hun Sen averred that the Thai business interests in Sisaket Province were "already complaining" and would suffer most if Thailand prolonged and exacerbated the diplomatic dispute by closing the border with Cambodia in a "frenzied reaction" to Thaksin's visit. He added that the RGC had already sent a message to Bangkok that it was indeed the right of Thailand to close the border but, unlike in 2003 when the Thais

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allowed goods to continue to cross, he would respond by directing that Thai goods would also be barred from crossing into Cambodia if Thailand did so.

15. (C) Again referring to perceived dissension among key leaders of the current Thai government, Hun Sen claimed that "not everyone is on good terms" and that Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban and Minister of National Defense General Prawit Wongsuwan did not agree with Prime Minister Abhisit and Foreign Minister Kasit on this issue. "I met with them here," Hun Sen noted, and "spent three hours with them in Hua Hin" on October 23, where their lack of support for the direction of the current Thai government was clear. Moreover, Hun Sen said that he had been contacted by unspecified Thai Senators and other members of the government to begin the work of diplomatic "remediation."

16. (C) As previewed by the Prime Minister, Thaksin's private commercial charter arrived at the military side of Phnom Penh's airport at about 9:30 a.m. on November 10, originating from Mumbai. Although local and international press viewed the arrival from a distance, Ministry spokespersons were guarded in their comments about the visit. Thaksin's car entered a motorcade secured by Hun Sen's bodyguard unit and departed for a lunch at Hun Sen's residence in Takhmao, south of the capital. At the end of the day, MFA spokesman Koy Kuong told reporters that no Thai request for extradition had yet been officially received, although others report that an extradition request from the Thai government has been already transmitted. Thaksin is reported to be staying in a villa close to the Cambodian Peoples Party headquarters not far from the Royal Thai embassy. Unconfirmed reports indicated that Thaksin is scheduled to depart Cambodia on November 13. Separately, in response to the Ambassador's inquiry during a meeting November 10, Commerce Minister Cham Prasidh commented that he was very familiar with the popularity polls recently conducted in Thailand and did not think they were the least bit credible. He added that he thought nothing Thaksin did or said in Cambodia would have much effect on the domestic situation in Thailand.

17. (C) Comment: Hun Sen remained thoughtful and calm throughout his discussion with the Ambassador, and there was no hint of the provocative rhetoric that he sometimes displays in public or private. In the weeks since Hun Sen's October 23 announcement that he would appoint Thaksin as an adviser, he has been most concerned about increases in border military activity; he now seemed pleased with the extent of military cooperation and believes that his decision to reduce the number of troops will contribute to continued cooperation. With that in place, Hun Sen has now turned his attention to the diplomatic front and seemed focused predominantly on how much and how quickly the Thai would erode diplomatic relations in what he believes is an effort to attract public support for a regime that can command long term support of neither the military nor a majority of the people. While it remains to be seen whether he has miscalculated in that assessment, it is apparent that he has received indications from some Thai officials that he has not. But, more importantly, none of that seems to matter much to the Prime Minister. Hun Sen has clearly calculated that whatever diplomatic downgrades are initiated by the Abhisit government do not outweigh the benefits that Hun Sen's friendship and support to Thaksin could provide to Cambodia both now and in the future. He seemed similarly uninterested in ASEAN or international reaction to the spat and did not directly respond to the Ambassador's inquiry about the message he intended to send to ASEAN or the international community about his actions.

18. (C) As much of the press and other reporting has suggested, Hun Sen's motivations are best described as personal political moves designed to attract perceived benefits to himself and Cambodia and to disarm his foes in the current Thai government. As this continues to play out, we expect Hun Sen will shift largely from an offensive to a defensive position. He is of course hopeful that the Thai will refrain from taking precipitous actions, but he is prepared to match any Thai action with a Cambodian reaction every step of the way, as he has done with the reciprocal recall of Ambassadors. In the meantime, we expect the U.S. and others will find a confident and relaxed Hun Sen during

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the upcoming Singapore meetings amenable to suggestions that a de-escalation of rhetoric and a re-engagement between Cambodia and Thailand is in the best interests of the region as well as the parties themselves. End Comment.

RODLEY